

THE NOVELS OF BENJAMIN DISRAELI

HAROLD BERMAN

IN the early part of the past century Von Arnim wrote a book entitled *Berthold's First and Second Life*. The idea sought by the author of that book, apparently, was to concretize the belief gaining currency at the time that an individual may enjoy, in the brief span of his earthly existence, either in the simultaneous Jekyll-and-Hyde form or in chronological succession, two distinct and unrelated careers.

In the case of the career of Benjamin Disraeli, the ambitious novelist who, unaided by family influence or wealth, rose to the premiership of Great Britain and to a commanding position in world affairs, it has become the favorite method of biographers to dwell on, if not exactly to explain it by, the thesis of duality. "Here is a case," these men seem to say, "of duality par excellence. Here is a man who possessed two distinct talents, a man who could successfully fight an election battle, maneuver men and policies in the lobbies of parliament, and then retire from all this hubbub to the peace of his study for a brief few weeks or months and emerge therefrom with the manuscript of a three-volume novel under his arm, having done which, he would return to the political scene, resume the bargaining and badgering, the combinations and manipulations of the party machinery as a matter of course and as if no interruption whatever in his normal activities had taken place." This, I admit, is indeed a pretty picture, but not at all a true one.

It appears to me that of all literary critics who attempted to fathom the depths of this great and dazzling personality only one man, the Dane, George Brandes, has truly succeeded in his task. As against, the seemingly superficial judgment of a certain prominent British critic who expressed the wish that "Disraeli's literary ability had been allowed to ripen undisturbed by all the worries and distractions of parliamentary existence" we find Brandes, in one of his books that has not as yet been translated into English, saying: "*Every product of his hand is an instrument forged by him in order therewith to bring us into the workshop of his ideas. Each book that he wrote is a window through which we are permitted to look into his soul.*"

In order to understand Disraeli, that strange, somewhat bizarre figure in which were blended the color and glow, the warmth and dreamy moodiness of the East with the cold realism and practical hardheadedness of the West—and the British variety of it, to boot!—it is necessary for us to study his background—the domestic, political, and social background, in order to discover what influences contributed to the shaping of that figure. We discover him to be the son of Isaac Disraeli, a literary recluse, who spent his mornings delving among the musty tomes of the British Museum, and his afternoons and evenings in the seclusion of his study, occupied with the composition of his many books, among which we, incidentally, find *Mejoun and Leila*, the first oriental romance published in the English literature. Isaac, in his turn, was the son of an Italian immigrant, who had come to England in the early part of the eighteenth century to seek his fortune. In his veins flowed the proud blood of the Spanish Jews who, in 1492, driven out of Spain by Ferdinand and Isabella severally dispersed to all corners of the earth, to seek a home wherever they could find toleration and peace. Some of them settled in Turkey, others in the Italian states and still others in the Netherlands. These men looked upon themselves as the very flower of the Jewish race, contemplated with pride their ancient lineage, and brooded on a past that, at certain periods in their long history, had indeed been glorious. This consciousness of an ancient and honorable lineage survived in the heart of the Voltairean Isaac Disraeli, a man who had consciously and deliberately cut himself off from identification with his people's ancestral worship and had allowed three of his children, the thirteen year old Benjamin among them, to be baptized into the Christian faith. This pride was transmitted to the son, who, in the exuberance of his fertile and brooding fancy, succeeded in fanning the smouldering embers of that pride and love into the roaring and scorching blaze that it eventually became in some of his novels.

So far for the domestic background. Now let us take a glance at the larger, national, scene.

Disraeli entered public life during the long and disgraceful reign of "the worst of the four Georges," George the Fourth, who for more than forty years ruled over England, first as Prince Regent and afterward as King. During that long reign British public life reached the lowest possible level in its long history. The parliament

—since Cromwell's day the House of Commons practically constituted the parliament—was dominated by the younger sons of the nobility and their satellites, their favorites and their toadies—the Righbys, the Tapers and the Tadpoles of Disraeli's novels—as well as by some few others who could afford to buy the nomination, or liberally debauch the few voters, or both.

The lord of the manor always had a "pocket borough" at his disposal, to give away to his favorite on condition that he do his legislative bidding. Very few of the common people had the vote; the property qualifications for members were exceedingly high, thus automatically excluding people of small means, should chance or determined will-power place the tempting opportunity in their path. The "rotten borough" system, a borough with little or no population but with representation in parliament, came into vogue. A classical and absurd example of this system is found in the case of Sarum, a borough boasting one non-resident voter, no resident population whatever, but having two members gravely sitting in parliament and voting. To balance this anomaly, however, we have that other condition in which many populous townships had no representation whatever in the legislative halls, simply because it suited the interests of some propertied and privileged group or other to have their inhabitants disfranchised.

Bribery in public life was rampant, accepted cynically and as a matter of course by that small fraction of the people that enjoyed the franchise, and punished only when it became too flagrant, as in the case of the Baronet Lopes who spent £200,000 to debauch the electorate of a single division. The government was presided over for a long term by Lords Liverpool, Sidmouth, and Castlereagh, the latter described by Wilberforce as being as "cold blooded as a fish." When he finally cut his throat in desperation at the wave of democracy sweeping over Europe, Byron said that "he cut a goose-quill."

Castlereagh even made serious pretensions to omniscience, "We alone know!" being his reply to all interpellations and quests for information. There was also the reactionary Lord Chancellor Eldon, one of the most legalistic and illiberal minds in the history of that exalted office. The populace suffered under various cruel and archaic laws—remnants of the medieval days—as well as under some new, and equally as vicious, enactments. In 1808, Romilly,

solicitor general in the Granville cabinet, wrote: "If any person . . . should attempt some legislative reform on humane and liberal principles he will find not only a stupid dread of innovation, but . . . a strange spirit in the minds of many of his countrymen." "I have examined," he wrote on another occasion, "the codes of all nations, and ours is the worst, and worthy of the anthropophagi." He also records the fact that when the bill to abolish hanging for shoplifting was being debated, one unnamed member bawled out "I am for hanging all!" It is a matter of record that Eldon, the lord chancellor, did strenuously oppose the abolition of this ancient abuse for which 72,000 people had paid with their lives in the reign of one merry monarch alone. In 1798 there had been a bloody suppression of one of the recurrent Irish rebellions; in 1819 there had been an almost equally brutal suppression of a peaceful gathering of the hungry operatives of the Manchester cotton mills. Two years previously the infamous "press law" had been promulgated, effectively muzzling the press and depriving the Englishman of his traditional and most cherished right to express his opinion freely on all public matters.

The church also had long since ceased to represent the people, to minister to their spiritual and physical needs, but had become an adjunct and the ready servant of the men of power and position, in whose hands reposed the bestowal of a fat "living" or an entire diocese.

"The torpidity on the side of religion of the vigorous English understanding," we find Emerson writing at about this time, "shows how much wit and folly can agree in one brain. Their religion is a quotation, their church is a doll, and any examination is interdicted with screams of terror . . . the religion of the day is a theatrical Sinai . . . the church . . . has nothing left but possession." One needs but to turn to Byron's *Age of Bronze* to find the withering complementary picture, a picture of its decadent twin-brother, the aristocracy of the day.

If on the one hand we have the corruptions and the stupidities of a degenerate and irresponsible nobility and its subservient and spineless church, we have on the other hand that untamed nascent power of the rising aristocracy of money, "the inspired bagman with his calico millennium," as Carlyle names them, the men who had risen to wealth and position by the aid of other men's inventive

genius and just a wee bit of their own enterprise, within the previous few decades. This class had no tradition behind it to look back to, and felt no sort of responsibility towards the hordes of men, women and children whom it lured away from their ancestral acres and peaceful cottages to be exploited and pauperized for a time, and callously abandoned to their fate afterward. The philosophy of life espoused by these bagmen, the philosophy of *laissez faire*, curiously enough, sailed under the flag of "liberalism," with the name of its natal city proudly tacked on thereto. It would appear, however, that Manchester truly had but little honest claim to the originality of this philosophy, a philosophy enunciated long, long ago by Cain.

It was these combined forces of evil, the forces of an outlived and spent Toryism and its church, and a selfish and grasping pseudo-liberalism, that, in the brief space of a few years, had converted "Merrie England" of song and poetry into a slum and thoroughly pauperized its populace, that Disraeli girded himself to battle against, and to achieve an ultimate victory over, in his writings as in his parliamentary activities.

The essence of Disraeli's political and social creed is embodied in four of his twenty novels. These are: *Sybil*, *Coningsby*, *Tancred*, and *Lothair*, the first two political, the other two imaginative and religious. Perhaps we should add to this quartette his earlier *Vivian Grey*, a satire on the political and domestic life of the upper classes, their satellites and their toadies. In this dashing and exuberant tale, the first two volumes of which Disraeli composed at the early age of twenty and the other three a year or so later, we already are able to discover the germ of that political and social philosophy that was to be more explicitly developed by him in later works.

Disraeli entered parliament in 1837, and shortly thereafter he, together with Lord John Manners—the Henry Sydney of his novels—Cochrane (who posed for the portrait of Buckhurst—and George Smythe, who is both Coningsby and Waldershare) organized the "Young England" group, an echo of the "Young Germany" of Stein and his associates, with the object of purging the conservative party of all its decadent and deleterious accretions, and, after that purging, to wage a better and a more successful battle against the nascent powers of a moneyed liberalism. "I am a conservative,"

he proclaimed in his Wycombe campaign address in 1832, "to preserve all that is good in our constitution; a radical, to remove all that is bad," holding with Burke that "for us to love our country, our country ought to be lovely." This brief sentence embodies the essence and substance of the political and social philosophy expounded by him for nearly half a century, especially in the group of novels named above.

In *Sybil* we discover a mighty echo of the woes of the laboring classes, of the Chartist agitations, of the good but impotent members of the middle classes of the parvenu sons of the newly-titled *Nabobs*, and of the aristocracy, the degraded, as well as the yet undefiled. The plot of the tale is simple, its implications many. Frenzied mobs of hungry Chartists burn the hay ricks of cruel Lord Marney, his brother Charles falls in love with Sybil Gerard, daughter of a commoner and angel of the poor. Through association with her Charles becomes acquainted with the miseries of the British masses. Subsequently, there is another case of arson; a mob burns Mowbray castle, Sybil's life is endangered, Charles saves her. Lord Marney dies, Charles gets the estate and marries the commoner, Sybil.

The book abounds in juxtaposed pictures of wealth and poverty, self-indulgence and luxury on the one hand, grinding and degrading need on the other, "two nations between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy," in the words of Disraeli. "The author of *Sybil*," says John Morley, "seems to have apprehended the real magnitude of the social crisis brought about by the growth of an industrial population."

We make the acquaintance of the Messrs. Shuffle and Screw, exploiting mill owners; the cruel, titled land-owner, Lord Marney, and the complaisant vicar who is glad to let things well enough alone, but also the humane Trafford. We have a picture of an eviction (as we also had one in *Vivian Grey*, written in the author's youth), and we also have a clergyman, St. Lys, who is a forerunner of Sidonia, that all-wise Jew of Coningsby. St. Lys is the type of clergyman who dares to think for himself and utters some heresies. "The prophets," he says, "were not Romans; the Apostles were not Romans; she who was blessed above all women, I never heard that she was a Roman maiden." For those early times this was a shattering discovery indeed.

The author puts the following sentiments in the mouth of one

of his characters: "Oligarchy has been called liberty, an exclusive priesthood has been christened a national church; sovereignty has been the like of something that has had no dominion, while absolute power has been wielded by those who profess themselves the servants of the people." A bit later he speaks with regard to the first reform bill: "If a spirit of rapacious covetousness, desecrating all the humanities of life, has been the besetting sin of England for the last century and a half, since the passing of the reform act the altar of Mammon has blazed with triple worship. To acquire, to accumulate, to plunder each other by virtue of philosophic phrases, to propose a utopia to consist only of wealth and toil, this has been the breathless business of enfranchised England for the last twelve years, until we are startled from our voracious strife by the wail of intolerable serfage."

Disraeli had penetrated beneath the surface of the reform bill passed by the Whigs in the 1830's, and comprehended that its effects were only political, and not social or economic. In connection with this bill he remarks: "It set men thinking; it enlarged the horizon of political experience . . . and insensibly it created and prepared a popular intelligence, *but . . . that was all!*"

That was all that the people got, and yet to us at this late day it seems that they wanted little indeed. What did the Chartist ask for? They asked for: 1) universal suffrage, 2) voting by ballot, 3) an annual parliament, 4) equal election districts, 5) no property qualifications for members, and 6) payment for their service. To these modest demands—the commonplaces of democracy today—the Tories replied with bullets and bloodshed and the Whigs with little more than a sop.

In "Coningsby" we have the complication of a youth falling in love with the political and social enemy of his house. Harry Coningsby grandson and adopted heir of the Tory Lord Monmouth (Lord Hertford, the prototype of the "Marquess Steyne" of "Vanity Fair") falls in love with Miss Millbank, daughter of a liberal manufacturer, is disinherited by his grandfather in favor of the daughter of a French actress, but ultimately marries Miss Millbank, who had in the meanwhile fallen heir to her father's fortune. And now Coningsby, a dreamy, dilettante of idealistic tendencies, and his wife, are sorely perplexed; shall they "denounce to a perplexed and disinherited world the rigid theories of a generalizing age that have destroyed the individuality of man" (that is, adopt the Mill-

bank faith) or should they devote themselves to conservative intrigues in conformity with the good old Monmouth tradition?

Coningsby is anxious to espouse the cause of the people, "the cause," as he says, "of our glorious institutions under which the crown has become a cipher, the church a sect, the nobility drones, and the people drudges," in which good cause that superlatively brilliant Sidonia (Disraeli's own alter ego) stands ready to assist him, but there is Rigby (a portrait of John Wilson Croker, some say) the political agent and marplot of Lord Monmouth, ready to confound him and lead him into the bog of corruption. Coningsby vacillates between the two, though he again and again utters scathing strictures on the Tory party, and is sufficiently clear-headed to realize that "the youth of a nation are the trustees of posterity," and, as such, have a two-fold duty laid upon their shoulders, a sentiment fully shared and brilliantly enlarged upon by Sidonia.

In *Tancred* Disraeli mingles superb satire with his congenital love for the gorgeous East and the dream of the ancient glories of his people. I say "congenital" advisedly as we already find this rapture of the East clearly and lovingly expressed in the letters that he wrote from the Orient to his sister Sara from 1827 to 1830, which were published in a little volume entitled *Home Letters* after his death. In these letters the comparatively obscure youth of twenty-one, with scarcely even a dream or a prospect of the political career in store for him, actually formulated the very policies with regard to the Orient that he sought to carry into effect as prime minister forty years and more later—still another evidence of the consistency and continuity of the career of this man of wisdom and genius.

Tancred, only son of the Duke of Bellamont, is beset by doubt—religious doubt. He hies himself to a certain bishop, a friend of the family, in an attempt to resolve his religious doubts, but soon discovers that he had gone to the wrong shop for that commodity—spiritual peace. There is precious little of the spiritual in the bishop's make-up, but a great deal of smugness and self-complacency, of satisfaction in things as-they-are. Tancred sails away on his yacht to seek salvation for his soul in the Holy Land, the land where "inspiration is not only a divine but a local quality," where God once on a time had chosen to reveal himself to the representatives of a certain ancient but small-numbered race. Tancred does indeed find that peace and that exaltation of spirit that he had

so vainly sought for so many years in the Occident. He is lost in mystic rapture, and he also fain would marry that wondrous woman, Eve, half Jewess and half Beduin, who is his guide and mentor in all his soul-searching and wandering in the Holy Land. But his horrified ducal parents arrive just in the nick of time; reluctantly, be it said. "Jerusalem!" exclaims Lord Carbrick, "what on earth could they go to Jerusalem for? I am told there is no sort of sport there. They say in the Upper Nile there is no good shooting!" Their arrival breaks the spell, and there ensues "a conclusion in which nothing is concluded," because, there really is no discoverable method by which this eternal conflict between the East and the West could be resolved to the satisfaction of any one, least of all the one who, in the words of one of the great poets of his race, "had his physical being in the West while his soul lived in the East." There is excellent humor in this book. The satire on the spokesmen of the established religion in *Tancred* is reminiscent of the craftsmanship of Voltaire in its gaiety, and equally good are the droll pictures of the nobility, and the ladies who dominate exclusive society. The religious topic is, however, treated in a more earnest vein in a succeeding book of Disraeli's, *Lothair*.

Lothair is a story of the romantic love and hankering for Catholicism, the "religion of infinite convenience" as it was termed by Hawthorne, noticeable about the middle of the past century among a considerable number of the better educated and leisured Englishmen, a movement that culminated in the conversion of Manning and Newman, and their ultimate elevation to princely estate in their new church. But we have no space here to analyze this book in detail. It should be remarked, however, as evidence of the peculiar compound of this strange man's genius, that after treating so realistically a strictly practical and localized problem perplexing the people of Britain in his own day, he should also be the one to write *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy*, the story of the rise and fall of a Jewish pseudo-Messiah in the Bagdad of the twelfth century, a tale replete with Oriental mystery and color, gorgeousness, rapture, and intrigue. But such are the inscrutable workings of the alchemy of genius as they manifested themselves in that man of unfathomed mystery, Disraeli.

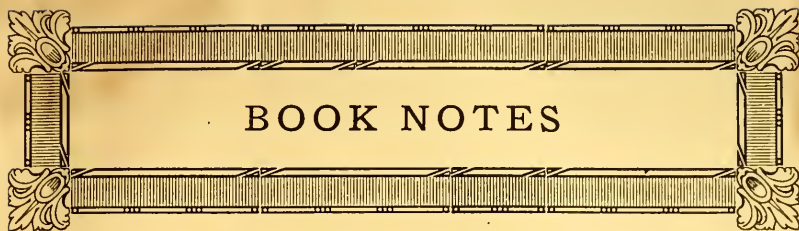
The foregoing, meagre quotations from Disraeli's writings and the sketchy analysis that we have made may furnish us with an in-

sight into his philosophy of life as well as of his interpretation of British history. Disraeli's view of English history is frankly a *Tory* view, but a *Tory* viewpoint mingled with radicalism. According to his view, Henry the Eighth was a tyrant because he despoiled the church of its lands which it administered as the trustee of and for the welfare of the people. "It is in the plunder of the church," he says, "that we must seek for the primary cause of our political exclusion from our social and political rights." Charles the First rightly was a martyr, because as Disraeli says, "he could have purchased his freedom by hanging all the Catholic priests that the rebels wanted him to"; Cromwell really was the *friend of the rising mercantile class*, the enemy of the monarchy, of the aristocracy as well as of the masses; William of Orange and the Whigs contributed to the establishment of that "Venetian oligarchy"—the rule of the Whigs and the Tories—which he held accountable for the establishment of the "two nations" within the British Isles, each one indifferent to the fate of the other. "Kings on earth," he says, "are Gods and blazing lights" and "in them alone . . . should power subsist." And as for the aristocracy "deep in the strata of the human heart the seeds of aristocracy are sown." But theirs is the privilege of service, acting as the elder brother of the Plebeians, a function which has lapsed since, by the transference of the headship of the church to the king and all the power to the newly risen men of wealth, and the transplanting of the common people from the cultivation of the soil to the factory and slum. Such, in brief, is the political and social creed for which Disraeli entered the lists and did battle by all the means at his command for upwards of fifty years.

Perhaps this wondrous career of Disraeli could not be better epitomized than in the words of William Makepeace Thackeray at the dinner given shortly after Disraeli's initial rise to cabinet rank, in the first Derby ministry of 1852. He expressed himself in the following terms: "Could a romance writer in after years have a better or more wondrous hero than that of an individual who at twenty years of age wrote *Vivian Grey* and a little while afterwards *The Wondrous Tale of Alroy*; who then explained to a breathless and listening world the great Asian mystery; who then went into politics, faced, fought and conquered the great political giant of these days; and who subsequently led Thanes and Earls to battle,

while he caused reluctant squires to carry his lance? What a hero would not that be for some future novelist, and what a magnificent climax for the third volume of his story, when he led him, in his gold coat of office, to kiss the queen's hand as the chancellor of the exchequer!"

Before concluding I wish to say a few words on the humor in Disraeli's novels, a quality, or a defect, if you choose, that retarded full appreciation of him and his work for some years. It is not British, for the British brand of humor has very little of the easy jocularity, the good natured banter rising occasionally to the full-throated laugh that we find in some of the more celebrated humorists of Europe. It is cruel and ironic in Swift, grotesque in Lewis Carroll, or broadly topsy-turvy in Dickens. Chesterton achieves his effects by balancing a pyramid on its apex, while Shakespeare puts his wittiest utterances in the mouth of his clowns, and the irrational Disraeli's humor was continental. He laughed as easily and as gracefully as Cervantes and as naturally as Rabelais, but he added thereto a dash of Oriental exuberance and fantasy as a flavoring to the dish; a compound to which the British palate required a long while to get accustomed.



BOOK NOTES

The Idealistic Argument in Recent British and American Philosophy. By G. Watts Cunningham. The Century Co. 1933. Pp. xiii+547.

After a brief introduction, sketching the beginning of idealistic philosophy with Locke's theory of knowledge and ideas, its development by Hume and Berkeley, by Reid and Hamilton, the author takes up in detail the arguments advanced by noted British and American men who support an idealistic philosophy. The first part of the book is expository and presents the different formulations of the argument in the historical development under survey. In the second part the author makes a critical evaluation of the validity of the different arguments.

The Life of the Church. By Pierre Rousselot, S.J., L. de Grandmaison, S.J., V. Huby, S. J., and M. C. D'Arcy, S.J. New York. The Dial Press, Inc. 1932. Pp. 337.

The title of the original French edition of this book is *Christus*, not in the sense that it is the story of the life of Christ, but rather the history of the life of Christ in His Church which carries on "His work of salvation." (Christianity claims to be the indispensable way of salvation for all men.) The aim of the authors has been to outline the essential steps in the development of the Catholic Church from the point of view of its doctrine, its ethics and its "party," beginning with New Testament Times, going on through to the social movements of the twentieth century, and stressing especially the influences exerted by great men and thinkers.

Humanism States Its Case. By J. A. C. Fagginger Auer. Boston, Mass. The Beacon Press, Inc., 1933. Pp. ix+154.

This book contains six lectures delivered on the Lowell Foundation. It deals with the scope of Humanism in its relation to theology, ethics, and metaphysics. Mr. Auer finds that the objections to the Humanistic doctrines by its opponents, especially the Theists, are really of much less importance than is usually supposed when the problem is clarified and there are no misunderstandings in terminology. He takes up the objections in detail, and finds many of them of secondary importance. In conclusion he gives the defense of the Humanists.

The Vision of the Nazarene. By the author of the *Initiate* with two portraits by David Anrias. New York. E. P. Dutton and Co. 1933. Pp. xi+126.

A short inspirational writing in which the author puts down the utterances impressed upon him by the Master Jesus, authenticated by experts in Spiritual Science. He speaks of dogmas, idolatry, of prayer and worship, of sinners and peacemakers. Part II deals with more occult and essoteric matters.

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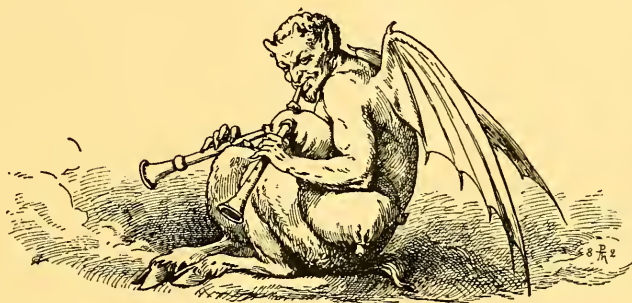
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